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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001269

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HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD  
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)  
DEPARTMENT PASS TO DRL (SMOODY)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/30/2029  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: STUDENT-LED HUNGER STRIKE BROADENS APPEAL; FOCUSES  
ON OAS HUMAN RIGHTS VISIT

REF: A. CARACAS 01168  
[1](#)B. CARACAS 00443

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBIN D. MEYER  
REASON 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: As of September 29, a student-led hunger strike entered its 7th day, expanding from an initial group of 33 protesters in front of the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Caracas to upwards of 160 students, unionists, journalists, and prisoners in several cities across the country. The hunger strike began on September 24 as a protest against the August 23 arrest of student activist Julio Rivas. Rivas was released pending trial on September 28, but the protest has continued and is now focused primarily on demanding a visit by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. As of mid-day September 30, as the protesters' health weakened, rumors circulated that the OAS was close to reaching an agreement with the protesters to end the hunger strike. Several of the students have quietly approached the Embassy inquiring about the possibility of meeting with U.S. officials in Washington. End Summary.

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Hunger Strike Broadens in Participation and Scope  
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[1](#)2. (C) The hunger strike began on September 24 with a small group of 33 university students protesting outside the Caracas headquarters of the OAS. Initially the students were demonstrating against the August 23 arrest of 22-year old student activist Julio Cesar Rivas for alleged involvement in fomenting violence during an August 22 march against the criminalization of protest (ref A). Rivas was charged with resisting authorities, unauthorized use of a firearm, and instigation of civil war. (Note: One Embassy source said that Rivas belonged to JUVA, a militant student group based in Valencia. End Note.)

[1](#)3. (SBU) Since the start of the hunger strike, however, other students, journalists, unionists, and prisoners have joined the hunger strike in Caracas and several other cities across the country. Media estimates the number of hunger strikers nationwide at 100-150, with about 80 students in Caracas. In addition to the release of Julio Rivas, the protesters have called for:

-- The visit by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS to Venezuela to investigate the current human

rights situation in the country. (Note: The Venezuelan government has denied previous requests by the Inter-American Commission to visit. End Note.)

-- A statement or acknowledgment by either national (or international) authorities that the political system in Venezuela is oriented towards the criminalization of expressions of dissent.

-- A statement or acknowledgment by either national (or international) authorities that there are political prisoners and people persecuted in Venezuela.

¶4. (SBU) Among the prominent figures who have joined the hunger strike are:

-- Former Caracas Metropolitan Police Commissioners Lazaro Forero, Jose Rojas, and Ivan Simonovis, imprisoned for alleged homicide and assault against marchers during the April 2002 coup d'etat;

-- Imprisoned journalists Leocenis Garcia and Jose Rojas;

-- Imprisoned banker Eligio Cedenio (whose attorney is assisting Julio Rivas); and

-- Several family members of imprisoned Caracas municipal employees (Ref A).

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Rivas Released, but Protests Continue  
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¶5. (SBU) On September 28, the government released Rivas pending trial. Rivas immediately joined the hunger strike

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and told reporters outside the OAS headquarters, "Today I am joining the hunger strike and calling on the OAS and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (CIDH) to come to Venezuela to achieve the freedom of all political prisoners... From here, the students and the mothers of Venezuela ask that the CIDH come to the country and verify the flagrant violations of the human rights of many Venezuelans, not just of the political prisoners, but also the political intolerance." Rivas added, "Venezuelans aren't afraid and we are not going to give up until the totalitarian government of Hugo Chavez respects our human rights, and respects our constitutional rights as Venezuelans."

¶6. (C) In response to Rivas' release and public statements, National Assembly Vice President Saul Ortega (PSUV) said that Rivas' release demonstrated that the courts functioned according to the law. He also claimed that Rivas was not in fact a student and that "the rector said that this young man doesn't study at this university, but they continue lying and they have their media show." Venezuelan Ambassador to the OAS Roy Chaderton told the press on September 29 that he doubted the students were even following through with the hunger strike: "They lay there on the pavement, eating pork arepas clandestinely, they give them juice and food to stay (strong) vigorous, but this doesn't impress me much."

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End Rumored to be Near  
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¶7. (SBU) As of mid-day September 30, the local press was reporting that the OAS was close to an agreement with the hunger strikers to end their protest. The agreement is rumored to involve the issuance of a public statement by the OAS.

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STUDENTS DISCREETLY INQUIRE ABOUT WASHINGTON MEETINGS  
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18. (C) Some of the students have discreetly approached Embassy officials and inquired about the possibility of meeting with U.S. officials in Washington. Post has requested more information about the proposed visit.

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Comment  
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19. (C) The hunger strike quickly gathered momentum over the past week, broadening its base of appeal from students to other aggrieved sectors. The government's September 28 decision to release Rivas may have been intended to defuse this momentum and deprive the protesters of a unifying symbol. However, the success of the hunger strike in gaining the release of Rivas may have a galvanizing effect on the opposition. That said, some observers think the public's interest in the strikers will quickly fade now that Rivas has been released.

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